

LES PAYNE



Ray's Racism Shouldn't Muddy the Case

THE NEW FBI director laughed, but the protester was not joking. The dreaded J. Edgar Hoover had died the previous year and the man picketing the FBI headquarters was testing the new winds of openness.

"Mr. Director," the young civil rights demonstrator reportedly told Hoover's successor, "I know the FBI conducted electronic surveillance on Dr. King. I want to save the bureau some film. So I'll tell you right now, I like women."

Clarence M. Kelley assured the bold philanderer that unlike Hoover he was mindful that guaranteed civil liberties extended to all Americans. Kelley, a St. Bernard of a police chief from Kansas City, maintained this distance between himself and Hoover in public as well as in private. "I don't believe in such activities as police roundups or vigilantes," he said after his confirmation in 1973. "Society has to place some restrictions on the police. Police, after all, are constantly depriving people of their liberty."

The death of Clarence Kelley, at age 85, last week brought back a 1977 interview I had with him over the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

First I implied that by covering its tracks the FBI was, itself, implicated in the King case. With Hoover waging warfare against King and the civil rights movement, the FBI appeared to have been an abettor and possibly even a co-conspirator in the affair.

I pressed with Kelley the possibility that James

Earl Ray, who had withdrawn his guilty plea and professed innocence, might have been a patsy. The death bullet, I argued from my own findings, could not be linked conclusively to James Earl Ray's rifle; the rifle barrel could not be linked to the windowsill from which it was allegedly fired; Ray could not be positively placed in the bathroom of the flophouse from which the shot was allegedly fired, and it could not be established that the bullet was even fired from the window, as the FBI had concluded.

Kelley, fully briefed by his agents, listened to all this, and said simply, "We don't have an unbroken chain of evidence." He insisted that the "circumstantial" case against James Earl Ray was solid, but he was not cocksure.

The case against Ray flared anew recently when King's son Dexter visited the convict and declared, incredibly, that the man serving 99 years for killing his father is innocent. Furthermore, Dexter King said that Ray and his hardscrabble family raised on the Missouri steep in the teeth of the Great Depression was not racist.

Laying aside the assassination issue, it is baffling that Dexter King could ignore Ray's racial record.

I recently questioned Gerry Ray on national TV about his statement that his brother James has been wild all his life on the issue of "politics and niggers." A knowing grin froze Ray's face as he began his evasion and quibbling. I reminded him that in addi-

tion to his being quoted in a book by William Bradford Huie, writer Mike Dorman had also heard Gerry's account of James Earl Ray's hatred of blacks.

Gerry Ray: Who is Mike Dorman?

Q: A writer out of New York. Are you saying that you never spoke to Mike Dorman?

Gerry Ray: I can't say definitely 'cause I don't remember his name. But I know definitely I didn't tell him nothing like that and he's a damn liar if he said I did.

It turns out that Mike Dorman has spoken to Gerry Ray a half dozen times over the last year. "The last time I called him, I said, 'This is Mike Dorman' and Gerry said, 'I know, I recognized your voice right away,'" Dorman recalled.

Dorman, who has written about the King case for Newsday and is the author of a book about Ray's key lawyer, Percy Foreman, was surprised Gerry Ray had denied knowing him. He was even more surprised that Ray had denied verifying his previous account of James Earl Ray's racism.

To say James Earl Ray is a racist is not to prove that he killed King. However, the evidence against him is as clear as the fact that he did not pull off the assassination and the two-month escape alone.

The King family is correct in demanding a full investigation. However, an intelligent probe does not start with the false premise that James Earl Ray had nothing to do with the murder.